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“STYLE” IN WOMEN’S CLOTHES

BY RICHARD BARRY

Now is the time for women to be delivered from the tyranny of “style” in clothes.

Does this sound like the fad of a dress reformer, or like some vain proposal to abolish the contrarieties of feminine lure? Does it sound like a chimera?

On the contrary, this is but the definition of the next inevitable step in national progress;—the end of that chimera, changing “style.” It is only sounding the knell of the heterogeneous fads in women’s dress which have obsessed us with increasing virulence for the past generation.

This step, instead of abolishing the feminine arts, will civilize them. It will lift us, as a nation, from the semi-barbarism of clothes-silliness to a higher aesthetic plane of clothes-adornment.

On the floor of Congress it has been declared that high heels are more dangerous to the welfare of the United States than German submarines. It is just as true that eccentric waist lines are more deadly than Big Berthas and that freakish skirt effects are more perilous to national safety than food waste.

We have become accustomed to the argument that the war is to be fought out more within the nations involved than on the battle lines. We recognize the truth that the nation or nations best fitted to survive, the ones best fitted to conserve all resources—not a few resources, but all—will be the final victor.

Then why longer ignore the obvious truth that confronts us concerning women’s clothes? We have come to the end of an era in everything else, from transportation to party politics; are we not also at the end of the “style” era in women’s clothes? Is not the time definitely here for the establishment of a simple, rational, permanent national costume?

There is a terrific waste of time, money and health in keeping up with the race of style. It has become a squirrel cage in which women perpetually exhaust themselves in striving to reach a place where they never arrive. And the men dangle futilely at their heels, incompetent either to stop the race or win it.

It is time to emerge from this semi-barbarism and become truly civilized. The older races long since learned the folly of this nonsense. The Orientals and the Slavs have settled on one becoming style for women which is made practically permanent, and in which is full opportunity for all true aesthetic expression and development. America, for the first time, is put to the actual test of making good her assertions of being the leader of the world. We will make good in the larger issue only by a complete mastery of the essentials of national character; among these essentials women's dress stands in the forefront.

So-called "style" is the assassin of character. It is an imposition made by the shrewd upon the ignorant, an easy advantage taken by pretense over worth. It is the curse of beauty, the bane of art and the death of originality. These truths have always been self-evident and undisputed. But now they are more. They are a menace to national endurance. Therefore, let us rally our forces and abolish "style."

Is there a man married to a woman of fashion who in the past five years has not felt a pang of shame at his wife's appearance? Does he ever stop to ask why it is that she, poor slave, has felt compelled to lead him, all unconsciously perhaps, into a shame that is degradation?

The reason is too simple.

Women have nothing to say about what they shall wear. A little group of men, possibly as few as a dozen, certainly no more than fifty, practically all located in New York, prescribe each season what the prevailing "style" shall be. They are business men engaged in the pursuit of making money, as quickly and as easily as possible. Most of them have come, within a few years or a generation, from the lower east side of New York, which accounts for the often grotesque admixture in a passing "style" of the motif of a European peasant costume with the Parisian eccentricities manufactured in the French capital only for export.

When one of these "couturiers" (the chief words of the women's dress trade have been adapted from the French)

wants to exploit a new “style” he dresses one of his saleswomen or models in it and sends her forth. The herd women (beginning with the upper classes) have seen these “styles” in the windows and in the “salons,” have heard and read of them, but no woman has had the courage to make a spectacle of herself until she sees someone else doing it. Thus the model performs the function of the lead bull at the slaughter house. Once the women of the herd have seen these “styles” they feel that they, too, must “keep up,” and not look old-fashioned, or out of date, and they hasten to the shops presided over by the graduates of the lower east side. Thus our “best dressers” become imitators of shop women, and the worst dressers sigh themselves into freakish imitations of the “best” dressers. And “style” ambles on a short pace, but never beyond another season, for the secret of the large volume of business is in the frequent change of “style.” Or so our “couturiers” believe, though they would do a more substantial business on a different basis.

Women understand the general facts all too well, but they should be reiterated. Who does not know, for instance, that these styles are repeatedly changed with the prime object in view of forcing the purchase of new materials? Last Spring, skirts were wide; now women must put a narrow skirt under the wide one and cut off the old skirt to show the new. Thus, even if women should cry for wide skirts after suffering a season in narrow ones they cannot use the same wide ones of last year, for they will be too short, and to make it absolutely certain the designers will doubtless proclaim that next season the skirts must be long as well as wide. Then, as a little added turn to the general imbecility of the thing, this season the skirts are humped up in the back so as to insure the use of three times the necessary material.

This is not a matter of any one particular season, although the present season (in midst of war) illustrates the absurdity and rascality of the idea as well as any. The present decree of skirts less than a yard wide to save material is simply an excuse for a change next year when that same narrow material cannot be used. At the same time the arbiters of fashion make sure that the two-yards-wide skirt is of the most expensive yet least durable material.

Thus American dress goods get the name, which in some cases is deserved, of being “shoddy.” Is it not true loyalty

to national reputation to bring about principles of American manufacture which will substitute for "shoddy" the name of fixed and reliable values?

Of course the physical suffering of women on account of these absurdities may be beside the question. Women have always been willing to suffer tortures for "style." Tight shoes and tight corsets have done as much to stunt future generations as low-class poverty. So why complain about narrow skirts of the present, except in the hope that women, having obtained a partial freedom, may now demand complete enfranchisement from the tyranny, not of clothes, but of dress designers? During the last period of the "hobble" skirt the matter became so poignant that street cars and equipages lowered their steps to accommodate the needs of the season's "style." If so much can be done in peace times for general convenience is it too much to ask in war times, as a measure of public policy, that the whole baneful "style" be abolished utterly?

This is not the time for woman to be hampered by tight skirts or freak bustles and excess cloth. She needs her freedom for activity, for accomplishment, and she needs her money and the money of the men for other things than absurd clothes. Physical freedom is her prime need, as it is that of the nation. Physical freedom is the basis of all other freedom—moral, intellectual, political.

It is hopeless for American designers to attempt an advance along the vicious path which has already been traveled to its final ingenious refinement by the more deft French designers. We have had this season a sample of what our native designer does in the silhouette, advertised as the "American fashion." This tight skirt, bustle effect, an ultra adaptation of post-Civil War style, did not "catch on," despite the efforts of models, showgirls and pseudo "smart" women.

The time has come to establish a style of our own and to make that style permanent. And when style ceases to be "style" it becomes costume. We are accustomed to patronize other national costumes, vaunting our superiority in changing "style." Whoso does that is ignorant of the fact that a costume is the last expression of a civilization, and that it comes after "styles" are outworn and discarded as ugly, barbarous and inefficient.

The American costume must be in keeping with American ideals. It must express the national character. It must

be both simple and beautiful. It must be capable of reproduction in the cheapest fabrics without losing the grace of its lines, and yet it must be able to lend itself to subtle adornment and elaboration for the pleasure of the wealthy and the artistic. Above all, it must be something so adroitly adapted to the manners of the people that it can be maintained long enough to be perfected. The fiat of a government might institute it, but time alone can establish it.

If all this required any revolutionary change it might be folly even to contemplate the step, for in nothing is the human being so conservative as in clothes. It is fortunate, doubly fortunate that the present styles approximate the ideal which might easily, with the proper authoritative definition, become the national costume. Therefore, we do not need reform; we need only standardization. If we can contemplate seriously national prohibition from alcohol surely we can acclaim national prohibition from the degrading, debilitating, incessant changes of style.

The straight lines of the season at hand offer us the way out. Except for certain freakish excrescences, which, luckily, have not “stuck,” the style of the present time is distinctly United States. The skirts are wide enough for comfort and long enough for grace; the sleeves are sensible, yet graceful; the neck may be high or low according to one’s choice; the waist line is normal. Could anything be more American?

What the majority of American women are wearing now should remain our national costume, or be rigidly held as the basis on which to build a national costume. The peril to the situation lies in the fact that “a little group of wilful men,” those designing designers, will not be content to let well enough alone, but will tamper and trifle with the effect until they achieve a general change for the purpose of building up quick sales.

The present way of dressing is an incorporation of our old shirt-waist-and-skirt idea, the coat suit which has made the American girl famous the world around. It is responsible for the one universal creation of an American artist, the Gibson Girl. Such lines lend themselves to all purposes of dress; they are charming in street or evening gowns, beautiful in afternoon effects and adaptable for evening wear; they may rule both house and street gowns, the sport, the one-piece, the two-piece, the three-piece, and they may be adapted for any demand in formal evening attire.

A generation or two of sticking to this one style and we would have something worth while in women's clothes. We might become (in respect of women's clothes) like the Chinese, with fabrics whose texture can survive a decade and with decoration to please and educate the eye of man instead of distracting and revolting him.

Another clothes vice bred by ever-changing "style" is the gradual deterioration of fabric until now practically our entire production is "shoddy." No matter what price one pays, it is all but impossible to get textiles that will last more than a year or two. This is largely because the mills look for quantity of production first, instead of quality. The designers and the whole brood of manufacturers that follows in their train hitch their volume of annual output ever higher and higher while the standard of values goes ever lower and lower. Women no longer expect anything to last. It is not the vogue to want durable materials, but those of rich appearance. Durability is a minor consideration, anyway, when the styles change so rapidly and so radically.

This leads to a trade consideration of the advantage or the disadvantage in a national costume. The business world might be against the standardization of a national costume, perhaps without analyzing its possibilities, though it would doubtless prove to be the soundest business wisdom to institute any change which would lead to a standardization of manufacture. If standardization is good for the production of oil or baked beans it certainly ought to be good for the production of cloth. The only ones to suffer would be the wholesale designers (those destroyers of true art), but the adroit creatures would doubtless adjust themselves to the new dispensation.

This is no plea for anything that would resemble a uniform. If the national costume should remain set on the present straight lines it would still permit of embroidery and embellishment.

Is it too much to ask of the Government, at a time when our young men are dying in the trenches, to stand behind the women in their desire to be sensible, and to help them maintain an American ideal in clothes by decreeing a national costume?

RICHARD BARRY.